REFLECTIONS ON *Growth* Number 29, August 2012

Advancing the Junior Youth Program "in a Variety of Settings and Circumstances"

In its recent messages, the Universal House of Justice has referred to the "rapid spread" and "increase in capacity" of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. It is no wonder that the program has been able to engage the idealism and interest of junior youth, for the Bahá'í vision of the potential of junior youth is so contrary to the prevailing conceptions society holds of this age group. As the House of Justice explained in its Riḍván 2010 message, Bahá'í communities see in these youngsters "altruism, an acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe, and a desire to contribute to the construction of a better world." Indeed, the experience of the friends in a growing number of clusters confirms that "only the capacity of the Bahá'í community limits the extent of its response to the demand for the program."

From its inception, the implementation of the program has been both systematic and evolving, a process that has fostered learning from the global to the cluster level. In an effort to disseminate the learning more widely, we are devoting two successive editions of this newsletter to sharing the experience regarding various dimensions of the junior youth program, a critical component of the community building process.

In this issue the accounts from different parts of the world highlight the experience related to four particular aspects of the junior youth program: forming junior youth groups and increasing their number, inviting youth from the wider society to serve as animators, forging relationships with parents and the community, and tapping into the program's transformative power.

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Forming Junior Youth Groups and Increasing their Number: *Even in clusters where there are no Bahá'í junior youth or very few, junior youth groups have been formed and have flourished. In expanding the number of groups, experience has shown that junior youth participants in existing groups have been some of the best promoters of the program.*

Canary Islands

In the following account, an animator of junior youth groups describes how the program for spiritual empowerment began in the **Gran Canaria** cluster.

> One day I decided to start a junior youth group in my community. I am aware now that this was one of the most important decisions of my life. There was not even one junior youth in my Bahá'í community with whom to start the group. So I decided to mention at the Nineteen Day Feast that if friends were interested or knew junior youth who might be interested, I would be at the youth center on Friday at 6:00 p.m.
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> Friday came and nobody showed up. I waited 45 minutes and headed back home. As I was putting my key in the keyhole, I received a call; two junior youth had just arrived at the youth center and wanted to see me! I ran back there in five minutes. I had never seen them before, but with them, a new phase in my life began, which I have called "hurricanes of confirmation."

I spent two weeks meeting with three junior youth—getting to know one another, studying together, and playing games. Tenderness from another world soon began to emerge among us. Each step I took was confirmed with a great step forward in service. The kids fell in love with the group, and in a short time they started to invite their friends. Soon there were 10 of us! I also began to receive calls from their mothers, who were totally surprised by the positive changes they had seen in their children.

The group continued to grow. We were 15, then 20; some of the youth came and left, but a large nucleus of participants remained who were undergoing significant transformation. The program was having its effect.

The youth's enthusiasm was really contagious. They learned the concept of confirmation and were developing great spiritual perception. They began relating to the participants of the junior youth groups in the cluster and a new dynamic developed in the junior youth program. The community was vibrant in the reflection meetings, where junior youth contributed with their vision, joy, and strength.

There were already four very strong junior youth groups with 28 participants when we decided to start a campaign to expand the program. On this occasion we were blessed with the visit of a friend who came to the cluster and began serving as a junior youth group coordinator. The campaign was designed within the first seminar for coordinators of junior groups, which I was able to attend.

Such was the love of the friends in the cluster toward the junior youth that it was easy to visit individuals and encourage them to become animators. We visited six people, and they all accepted to receive training. During the visits we prayed together, read from a message of the Universal House of Justice, and discussed opportunities for the growth of the groups in the communities.

After completing Book 5, recently trained animators participated in the campaign to promote new groups. The junior youth who were already participating in the program were the key to the success in opening new groups. Familiar with the discourse of the program, they went to the parks, conversed with junior youth, and invited them to participate. Then each animator set the date and time where the activity would take place. The above was done for a week and as a result, six new groups were started!

Portugal

The resource person for the junior youth program on the Iberian Peninsula visited Portugal and reported on the successful efforts of the friends to form junior youth groups.

The first cluster I visited was **Centro Litoral**, where a Bahá'í who is a university professor had been training three of his students in Book 5, who were now eager to begin serving as animators. They visited some classrooms in a school where one of the animators works and, after talking to the headmistress, introduced the program to the students. I was able to attend one such presentation, and I was pleasantly surprised to see how well they explained the concepts of service and excellence, and interacted with the junior youth. They would give the students a piece of paper on which they could write down their names if they were interested in joining a group. Even though that cluster did not have any previous experience with the program, I found it so interesting and encouraging to see how this tutor was accompanying the new animators, and how eager they were to serve.

The cluster is divided into three sectors, with five main local communities. The junior youth coordinator has identified his own town and a neighboring community as those in which he will focus his energy and time. He is training and accompanying six youth from both localities, so that they can open their own groups in their neighborhoods. Some of the youth are from a Bahá'í background but some are not. He said he had met two of them, who live in his neighborhood, only one year ago, and they are already serving as animators! I also participated in a junior youth group that was taking place at the same time as another junior youth group, a children's class, and two study circles, all sustained by local friends, with the exception of one tutor who comes from a neighboring community to help out. At the end of the evening, all the children, junior youth, and youth went out together to pick up rubbish as a service activity. It was wonderful to see the joy and the unity it produced.

United States

The following report from a Counsellor analyzes some of the lessons learned in the southwest region regarding the formation and expansion of junior youth groups and the value of holding group meetings in more formal settings.

Beginning last summer, our reflections suggested that it might be helpful to explore the formation of junior youth groups in more formal spaces as a means of increasing participation in the junior youth program. Much of the experience over the years had been to form groups informally. In many cases, when and where a junior youth group might meet was not determined until engaging potential participants, and the idea was that they would help find a meeting time and place. This approach, however, had often led to the formation of small junior youth groups without a set meeting location.

Not surprisingly, it has been difficult to sustain groups under such conditions. Furthermore, most junior youth groups have typically been formed with a wide age range. Over the last year, thought has also been given to forming groups based on age or grade level. Although these ideas have been discussed, it has been difficult for coordinators and animators to conceive of working with junior youth by age when a group only has five or so participants. The notion existed in theory, but until clusters developed the capacity to work with larger numbers, it was not possible to talk about forming junior youth groups by age. And of course, it is very difficult to conceive of working with large numbers when animators are struggling to sustain even small groups.

Over the last six to nine months, emphasis has been given to exploring partnerships with organizations in neighborhoods in order to offer the junior youth program in schools and community centers. As opportunities have materialized and more groups have begun to meet in these places, it has helped the friends realize the possibilities. For instance, while an animator may have considered it nearly impossible to work with more than 10 junior youth in an informal neighborhood setting, given all the distractions, the notion of working with 15 to 20 junior youth in a classroom or community center seems far more realistic. With this realization, the friends have now started to think in terms of forming large junior youth groups divided by age (12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds) in a single large setting.

Exploring these ideas has helped the friends consider how to work practically toward larger numbers. It goes without saying that the 12 December 2011 message from the House of Justice has helped immeasurably in enabling the cluster agencies appreciate that they are all working to advance the same process, but it has also helped them—particularly the Area Teaching Committees—understand the importance of a strong junior youth program

in a cluster. Those clusters where this consciousness was already emerging have been able to translate it into action more quickly. In the **East Valley** cluster, Arizona, for instance, the friends were able to channel the energy of their most recent expansion phases to expand the junior youth program significantly in a few key neighborhoods. The Area Teaching Committee was able to draw on its experience designing effective teaching campaigns in order to systematically register large numbers of junior youth. The fact that formal spaces for the junior youth groups had been identified and secured before the expansion phase helped the Area Teaching Committee structure the outreach systematically around these locations. Furthermore, confident that a team of three to six animators could work effectively, if properly accompanied, with a group of 60 junior youth divided by age in an environment conducive to learning, the friends were able to set audacious but realistic goals to register 60 junior youth for each of the formal settings.

In East Valley the expansion phase efforts were concentrated in Mesa and Tempe. The friends were able to register about 120 new junior youth in Mesa and over 60 in Tempe. These groups are meeting in a variety of locations including a Boys and Girls Club, an Active Learning Center, a neighborhood banquet hall, and apartment common rooms. Prior to the expansion phase in East Valley, about a third of the participants in the junior youth program were concentrated in the neighborhoods of Tempe and Mesa, while the other two-thirds of the participants were in groups scattered around the cluster. Although participation is still being stabilized in many of the new groups, it is clear that participation in the junior youth program in the cluster as a whole is now much more concentrated in Mesa and Tempe. Consequently, assistant junior youth coordinators are each working with a number of animators in each of these particular areas.

The efforts to increase participation and formalize the junior youth program have led to other positive developments. For example, animators who work with several groups in one setting are now functioning as teams, meeting ahead of time to prepare for each session, reviewing lessons in the junior youth texts, and planning complementary activities like service projects. The junior youth coordinators are working closely with the teams of animators, helping them prepare for each meeting, visiting the groups regularly, and reflecting after each session. This, of course, is helping to strengthen the quality of the junior youth program and increase the capacity of both coordinators and animators. Interestingly, as efforts have been made for the junior youth groups to meet in more formal settings, it is helping focus attention on the quality of the animating. When junior youth groups meet in informal settings, it can often mask the ability of the animator to engage the junior youth in deep conversation because so much of their energy is directed toward minimizing distractions—ice cream trucks, friends passing by, games in the park, or younger siblings.

Inviting Youth from the Wider Society to Serve as Animators: *In order to meet the demands for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program in many clusters, the believers have approached individuals in the wider society, generally young people, to become trained as animators. As the following accounts demonstrate, it is not difficult to "find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society" and "to begin a process of collective transformation."*

Australia

In a report on the development of the junior youth program in the **Brisbane Bayside** cluster, the Counsellor describes how the friends learned to effectively introduce the program to the residents of a selected neighborhood and after a huge response, how they organized

themselves to accompany those offering to be trained as animators. The account also illustrates how this effort served to strengthen the institutions and agencies in the area.

> Through the impetus of the learning site to learn about the development of the junior youth program within receptive populations, plans were made in 2011 to scout out a number of different suburbs. The effort was largely carried out by the junior youth coordinator with a group of animators. During this scouting, the group focused their efforts on the Woodridge suburb, which showed a degree of receptivity to the program. On the basis of this assessment, during the learning site seminar in May, the participants in the seminar, along with animators from the cluster, arranged a three-day campaign. The result of this campaign was that 12 individuals started Book 1 with the aim of becoming animators. In June, four youth went as homefront pioneers to the suburb to help consolidate these 12 individuals. Over the next two successive cycles, systematic plans were made by the cluster agencies, in collaboration with the learning site, to further engage the population. This effort resulted in over 70 individuals participating in Book 1, with hundreds more showing interest in supporting the program.
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> The immediate challenge that confronted the cluster agencies was the scale of the consolidation work. Eight visiting tutors and one additional homefront pioneer were enlisted to support the consolidation work, which included facilitating study circles and also visiting the participants and others who had shown interest during the campaigns. Also, four additional homefront pioneers will be moving into the suburb in a few months. A team is also being put in place to coordinate the consolidation work, that is, to help further systematize the home visits and the introduction of devotional gatherings. Currently, there are about 60 individuals who are being accompanied through study circles and/or home visits. With the arrival of the new homefront pioneers, the plan is to accompany an additional 20 to 30 individuals.
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> To respond to the intensity and scale of the learning being gained and the accompanying required in Woodridge, the study circle coordinator, two Area Teaching Committee members, the junior youth coordinator, and the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants have been working closely to support the expansion and consolidation activities there. This includes regular collective gatherings and also one-on-one meetings between these different individuals. The role of the Board members in working shoulder to shoulder with the homefront pioneers and the cluster agencies has been crucial to the developments in this area.

With each teaching campaign over the cycles, the friends have been learning how to effectively hold conversations with the residents to help them see the vision of community building and to encourage them to walk a path of service. The initial conversations in Woodridge focused largely on inviting the population to participate in activities. The success of this approach was limited, but as the content of the conversations evolved to include many of the key concepts from Book 5 and the vision of community building, the interest and response of the population have been heightened. The understanding of the teachers and their commitment to long-term action have been crucial to conveying these concepts effectively and to inviting individuals to become part of the process. Being able to convey the nature of the training institute courses as that of walking a path of service has been valuable in differentiating this course from the approach the residents may be familiar with in other educational programs.

Vanuatu

A wife and husband, who are not Bahá'ís, became involved with the junior youth spiritual empowerment program a few months ago. They both have completed Ruhi Institute Books 1 and 5, and the wife is currently serving as an animator. A resource person for the junior youth program had the opportunity of meeting her last month and shared the story she told:

> I am so happy to be able to accompany the junior youth in my village. I am a Christian, and my husband follows the traditional beliefs of Tanna. Since I got married, I have been unsuccessful in attracting my husband to God and religion. But since we both got involved with the junior youth program, my heart's desire has been fulfilled and my husband is now attracted to spiritual matters. The junior youth program has been the cause of this transformation in my husband.
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> I am so happy and delighted that I am able to perform acts that are important and meaningful. I am now serving as an animator and accompanying a number of junior youth in my village. The group just carried out a service project. They built a little house at the crossroad where the roads from south, north, and east meet. This little house is like a rest house where the travelers who have walked long distances can rest for a while and then continue with their journey. They can also take refuge in the house if they are caught in heavy rain. This is one of the service projects my junior youth have carried out. I have been visiting many parents and have been telling them about the importance of the junior youth program in transforming the lives of our future generation. I have also brought together a group of older youth to study Book 1. After completing Book 1, they will study Book 5 so that they too can serve as animators.
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> Since I became involved with the program, I have been opposed by my own relatives as I am a Christian. They tell me, "Why are you doing this? You are not a Bahá'í. You are promoting a program that belongs to the Bahá'ís." But I have never had any doubt. I have decided to dedicate my life to this program. I am not very well educated. I have only completed up to class 6, but the little education I have I am using for assisting the junior youth in my community and my island.

<u>Grenada</u>

A young pioneer was friends with the head of a community college that has a community service component for its students. He presented the junior youth spiritual empowerment program as a possible avenue of service, and it was accepted. Students who registered for this "community service" were expected to study Books 1 and 5. At the end of their study of Book 1, they were required by the college to share their comments on the course. Following are a few of those accounts:

> During the period of my community service, I learned something new each day. Apart from *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, we were given *Bahá'í Prayers* and *The Hidden Words*. In my community service, I felt like a new me. I saw everything around me differently. I felt calmer and when I was provoked, I didn't get vexed. After a while, I began to share my experience with my family and friends. These days when I see a friend or relative struggling, I remember what I've learned, and I hurry to their rescue. I share with them "O Son of Being! Busy not thyself with this world, for with fire we test the gold and with gold we test our servants." After my community service, I can conclude that I have discovered the greatest gift which God has given us, this is prayer. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "There is nothing sweeter in the world of existence than prayer."

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The training of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program was a life-changing experience for me. Every aspect of the word "service" has changed for me. This program taught me to serve selflessly, consider the opinions of others, and to appreciate my situation in life. I learned how to treat people appropriately, with a "kindly tongue," and without scorn or sarcasm, and to be sincere. This is how God wants us to treat each other and the way we are to live, in peace and without dissension.

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In the books, *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit* and *Bahá'í Prayer*s, I've learned many things that I need to put into practice. These include praying regularly to have a relationship with God on a day-to-day basis; forgiving individuals who treated me wrongly; showing kindness, love, and appreciation to people; removing any sinful deeds from my life; and also sharing what I've learned with other individuals so that they can also have a connection with God. This community service was very beneficial to me by helping me develop spiritual characteristics.

Forging Relationships with Parents and the Community: *An essential feature of the junior youth program is working with the parents of the participants, in the context of their children's participation in the program. The parents greatly appreciate that the program seeks to mold the capacities of junior youth for service to humanity, releasing their energies for a purposeful and constructive life. The two stories in this section are examples of the impact the program can have on parents and on a neighborhood.*

India

We had a campaign for Book 5 in a village in the **Cuddalore** cluster, Tamil Nadu, and nine junior youth groups were established as a result of the campaign. Sunita was one of the new animators, and her group started a week ago. Her father drinks alcohol regularly, and our coordinator observed this often. One day when the junior youth were meeting outside Sunita's house and discussing the character Musonda and reading the second lesson in *Breezes of Confirmation*, Sunita's father (who did not drink that particular day and was sober) heard the whole conversation among the junior youth.

He came out of his home and asked Sunita what she was doing. She told him about Musonda and together they both studied the lesson. Sunita's father was so impressed with the lesson. He felt bad about his life, thinking how a small girl like Musonda was thinking more deeply than himself. He promised his daughter that he would stop drinking from that day forward and asked her to go through the lessons with him. He also asked Sunita to say prayers for him. Sunita responded by saying that rather than saying prayers only for her father, she felt they should pray for the whole of humanity. On hearing this, Sunita's father expressed his happiness on how the Ruhi courses had changed his daughter into a responsible person caring about society. He also expressed his desire to take up the Ruhi courses. Sunita, who was so excited, immediately called the coordinator and shared the news with him.

Australia

In two suburbs of the **Sydney Metro** cluster (Bidwill and Westmead), a few pioneers and other youth are engaged in the process of community building. Both suburbs comprise receptive populations, the first Pacific Islanders, the second Indians. In Westmead, as an act of service, one of the junior youth groups arranged a picnic in the local park to bring together the children and families attending children's classes in the neighborhood. The junior youth (all from the wider community) chaired the proceedings and facilitated a

discussion about the impact of children's classes on the children and the neighborhood. The parents were very positive in their comments. The junior youth served the food, helped organize games, and helped clean up.

The children and junior youth all speak eagerly of looking forward to their opportunity to serve as animators, and their parents are very supportive of these aspirations. The picnic seemed like such a simple act of service, yet had deeper implications for the neighborhood. It brought together parents who did not know each other and, to the delight of several of the mothers, engaged the fathers with one another and with the classes. The quality of the interactions the pioneers had with the parents was striking, including the genuine love they have for this population in all their conversations and actions. The Indian friends seem to hold the pioneers in very high regard and speak of them with great affection.

The Transformative Power of the Junior Youth Program: *Stories abound that illustrate how the program for junior youth is "sharpening their spiritual perception, enhancing their powers of expression, and reinforcing moral structures that will serve them throughout their lives."*

Italy

The resource person in Italy for the junior youth program has shared a story of how the junior youth material has been able to exert a profound influence on the lives of a group of girls who are part of the program in the **Mantova** cluster.

The group is composed of a very solid group of friends, 10 girls, who have been together since kindergarten. They're very united, intelligent, and dedicated, but over time had become known in their school as a "closed" group that wouldn't let anybody else "enter the club." They were actually admired by the young girls and boys of the school, but their attitude was exclusive, and others often felt belittled by their presence and closeness. The animators, however, realized that the girls in the group were sincere and willing to better the world around them. They believed in their spiritual qualities and didn't look at their present behavior but at the God-given attributes they had.

A change in the attitude and behavior of the girls in the group was clear as they studied *Breezes of Confirmation*. They began talking about the meaning of an outward-looking eye, about the concepts of taking care of the needs of people around us, and also loving people who don't belong to our family or close circle of friends, as Chishimba and Godwin had done, helping the woman with the burden on her shoulders.

The girls in the group had been upset with the presence in their school of one specific girl, whom we will call Maria: they couldn't stand how she was shy and always alone, wearing dark clothes, looking sad, and showing little care for her physical appearance. Having been touched by the story in *Breezes,* they decided to learn to do the same in their lives. Maria immediately came to their minds. They realized how immature their behavior had been and also that Maria surely had positive qualities. They set out on a mission for the week: to become friends with Maria.

The next day at school they all encircled her (and she was a bit scared) and started asking her many questions. They started to spend time with her and show her more and more warm attention. Just looking at her qualities, they learned to love her even more than they expected. They invited her to go around the school with them at break-time. This filled Maria with the happiness of having new friends; she had never felt so included. The group realized they didn't want to be a "club" anymore. Yes, they wanted to keep

their unity but also open it up to other people, building unity with everyone. In one week they spent more time with many friends, and this change was noticed by the other students at the school, who started asking them what had happened! Now Maria has decided to join the junior youth group. She's happy to contribute to the same transformation she's experienced and to become a cause of friendship with others.

Canary Islands

The animator, whose experience in forming a group is described on page one, also wrote: "Many miracles and transformations have occurred during this process that have inspired us and given us strength to continue. Undoubtedly the changes we have seen in the junior youth themselves have been the greatest inspiration." He shares brief stories of the impact the program has had on junior youth whom others had sometimes given up on.

Carlos was a problem child, or so they called him. Truthfully, this perception of him did not help at all in improving his situation. Carlos used bad language and could not talk about his feelings. He got into certain problems with the law and had been expelled from several schools. His relationship with the junior youth program transformed him in a way that could be seen by all. The first significant change occurred during the project. One day, unwittingly, he interrupted the conversation of two adults and said, "Sorry that I interrupted you." He then froze and exclaimed, "Did I just apologize? Am I going crazy?" He was realizing his own inevitable transformation. Since then he has shown his eagerness to improve and his extremely helpful nature. He has been a source of inspiration for all of us. Carlos has said, "You are my second family."

Elena is a girl with many relationship problems because her classmates were constantly making fun of her. When she first came to the group, she did not dare look straight into anybody's eyes and never uttered a word. Slowly she began gaining self-confidence, to the extent that she accepted a lead role in a play at the reflection meeting.

The day of the play, a woman showed up asking to see Elena's junior youth animator. That was me. I was afraid because I thought she was upset. She looked straight into my eyes, and I could see an expression of deep emotion in her face. She said, "Thank you very much. I do not know what you are doing with my daughter, but thank you for everything." It was a miracle for this mother to see her daughter so well integrated with other youth of her age and getting ready to perform before the public.

Jorge is a very kind youth who from the beginning connected immediately with the values and ideas of the junior youth group. He has always been willing to improve, to face challenges, and tries to do the best he can. He used to stutter when reading or speaking in public, but he set the goal of entering a poem recitation competition in his high school. In the group we encouraged and supported him fully. Jorge improved his speech so much that he won first place!

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